

## IMAGINARY COMPANIONS OF CHILDREN\*

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THE phantasy-life of the child has received much attention on the part of many workers in the various fields of child psychology. The subject of imaginary companions, or its several synonyms—phantom siblings, make-believe friends etc., however, has been left in the background and but little emphasis given to it. In general, it has been lumped together with day-dreaming, fairytale dramatizations and other manifestations of the child's active phantasy-life.

As Bender and Lipkowitz (1) have observed, many American psychologists appear to hold the view that the child's use of his capacity to phantasy is unwise, if not actually unhealthy. They indicate that the behavioristic approach of Watson emphasizes the motor behavior but offers no adequate understanding of the phantasy-life in normal psychological development. Freudian thinking would see in phantasy-creations a regression from a difficult present situation to a more pleasurable primitive one, often symbolically expressed. Meyerian psychology, concerned with cause and effect, would see dynamically-determined behavior patterns, begun by withdrawal from reality and phantasy-building, avalanching into a parergastic reaction.

Such terms as "forgetting of reality," "a self-sustained childish delusion endowed with hallucinatory vividness," "cravings of a baffled instinct of gregariousness," "pre-schizophrenic flight from reality," "temporary dichotomy of personality" and "wishful thinking" are quoted from the literature on various forms of childhood fantasies by their authors. No definite concept of the significance of the creation of imaginary companions in the psychology of the child has yet been formulated.

Jersild-Markey-Jersild (2) in a study of 143 children who reported imaginary companions, found that 79 per cent of these were either human beings, story characters or, in five cases, elves and fairies. The remaining 21 per cent were anthropomorphized animals, dolls and special objects. While some children described their imaginary companions as endowed with a peculiar apparent reality and marked vividness, the majority described characters which were less permanent and vivid and which apparently could be revived or changed entirely at the caprice of the child. Some children mentioned characters who were shared by other actual playmates. These imagined characters often appeared to be somewhat troublesome creatures. A greater number of girls were able to give definite descriptions of imagined playmates and more frequently had make-believe companions of the opposite sex than did boys. Children able to describe definite make-believe playmates had a higher IQ than those who did not.

Svendsen (3) in a study of 40 cases observed that vivid and sustained imaginary companions were encountered three times as often among girls as boys. This

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phenomenon was not limited to children of superior intelligence, though apparently more prevalent among them. Personality difficulties of a mild nature in 35 of the 40 cases were found, with timidity leading. Seven of the children, however, were described as leaders. At the time of creation of the companions, 55 per cent were "only" children. Activities shared with imaginary companions were usually those which were highly charged emotionally by virtue of being novel and pleasurable, or humiliating and consequently painful. The play tended to reflect parental attitudes, particularly disciplinary attitudes and the child's reactions to them. There was clear indication that the experiences were accompanied by visual imagery.

Harriman (4) believes that about one-third of all children between the ages of three and nine have imaginary companions. He feels that they exemplify the creative impulse and that formal education may repress the tendency. According to him, the imaginary companion is an illustration of wishful thinking compensatory for a real or fancied deprivation of completely satisfying flesh and blood companions. He cites several cases where imaginary companions persisted through adolescence into adult life.

Green (5) discusses imaginary companions together with day-dreams and finds that the phantasy disappears when the child is at school. He believes it is the expression of the cravings of a baffled instinct of gregariousness. This is apparently gratified when school and friends make the imaginary companion unnecessary.

Kirkpatrick (6) believes that not only do a few lonely and highly imaginative children have imaginary companions but nearly all children have them in some form for a greater or lesser period of time. Sometimes the imaginary companion is an ideal self, sometimes a scapegrace, and at other times it is not the self at all but a distinct personality.

After the survey of scientific literature it may be worth while to turn to literature in general. Not only does the theme of imaginary companion occur frequently but the content of the phantasy is stressed. It no longer stands isolated to be measured by some uncertain standard, but is woven into the life of the child, and the necessity and utility of such a phantasy is shown. Wherever an adequate use of this theme is made in the description of early childhood, a fuller and more complete understanding of the protagonist so depicted is gained.

Hervey Allen (7) in his *Anthony Adverse* makes skillful use of this theme as he describes the character of Anthony. Of the child's created playmates, he says:

They were as real to him now as any other people who came into the court. All he had to do was to think about them and they appeared; "Anthony" in the pool, the Bronze Boy, and the children from the stone ring who danced so gaily about. . . .

Robert Louis Stevenson (8) in several of his poems for children has touched upon this subject with his almost subjective understanding of the child's phantasy-life. In *The Unseen Playmate* he writes:

When children are playing alone on the green  
In comes the playmate that never was seen.

In another poem, *Foreign Lands*, he treats of anthropomorphized playmates:

Where all the children dine at five  
And all the playthings come alive.

A. A. Milne's (9) *Winnie-the-Pooh* is a collection of stories exemplifying the anthropomorphization of toys. One poem gives an excellent description of an imaginary companion.

Binker—what I call him is a secret of my own,  
And Binker is the reason why I never feel alone,  
Playing in the nursery, sitting on the stair,  
Whatever I am busy at, Binker will be there.

Una Hunt's (10) well-known autobiography deals with her imaginary companion. Una Mary, who was all that the real Una was not, was all that the real Una would like to have been.

Edgar Allan Poe's (11) *William Wilson* portrays a rather macabre imaginary companion.

It was my antagonist—it was Wilson, who then stood before me in the agonies of his dissolution—Not a thread in all his raiment, not a line in all the marked and singular lineaments of his face which was not, even in the most absolute identity, *mine own* . . . he said: . . . “In me didst thou exist—and, in my death, see by this image, which is thine own, how utterly thou hast murdered thyself.”

A curious coincidence, if it be one, of almost the exact theme, can be found in de Musset (12).

Du temps que j'étais écolier  
Je restais un soir à veiller  
Dans notre salle solitaire  
Devant ma table vint s'asseoir  
Un pauvre enfant vêtu de noir  
Qui me ressemblait comme un frère  
  
Partout où j'ai voulu dormir  
Partout où j'ai voulu mourir  
Partout où j'ai touché la terre  
Sur ma route est venu s'asseoir  
Un malheureux vêtu de noir  
Qui me ressemblait comme un frère.

Lord Dunsany (13) describes a shadow so that we see it as an ever-faithful companion.

And then I would hold up my hand and move every finger and each joint of my arm; and see the shadow answering, answering, answering. And I should nod to it and bow to it and curtsy. And I would dance to my shadow alone. And all this I would do again and again all day. . . .

An example of an imaginary family is in one of Charles Lamb's (14) essays.

. . . and while I stood gazing, both the children gradually grew fainter to my view, receding, and still receding till nothing at last but two mournful features were seen in the uttermost distance, which without speech, strongly impressed upon me the effects of speech: “We are not of Alice, nor of thee, nor are we children at all. . . . We are nothing: less than nothing, and dreams.”

## CASES

In a comparatively short space of time we have observed 14 cases of imaginary companions among the children on the Children's Ward of Bellevue Psychiatric Hospital. They were found in a heterogeneous and unselected group referred to the hospital for a variety of reasons. These ranged from behavior disorders, delinquency, unfavorable home situation and orphan placement. In no psychotic child was a case of imaginary companion observed. The cases do not resemble one another; on the contrary, each is as different as the personality of the child in question; yet merely tabulated results would be no indication of the personality or the problems of the specific child.

I. Charles was a 10½ year old colored boy of average intelligence, the only child, an older brother having died in infancy. The father had deserted the family several years previously. The mother had never taken much interest in the boy and this, coupled with the fact that she worked out, increased the rejection felt by the child. On the ward Charles made an excellent adjustment. He enjoyed the presence of the other children, employed to the fullest his opportunities for companionship and took active part in all the work and play facilities available. In psychiatric interviews he revealed a vivid phantasy-life.

"I was playing and one day it seemed I had a brother and a sister—John and Mary. They come when I am very lonely, not when I am playing with the boys. They are very much like me. My brother is 9 and my sister is 10. They are very pretty. They play with me and only talk about games and where I was. They would ask why I have been bad all the time. They say if I will be bad all the time and never good they won't come again. They are a great comfort to me when I am all alone."

When discharged he was no longer preoccupied with his former phantasies. This child, by means of his creation of imaginary companions, was not escaping from reality. His vivid phantasy-life was actually constructive, and in his own way, he was making up for deficient reality.

II. Joseph was a 10 year old white boy of about average intelligence, who had not gotten along well in a boarding home. His entire family was disrupted. His life had been most insecure, and because he accompanied his father on the latter's travels, he had never been able to secure adequate schooling or make firm emotional attachments. He had had a traumatic sexual experience with an adult and had become quite bewildered in his struggle with this and his other problems. He presented a rich phantasy-life and freely discussed several imaginary companions.

"Sometimes I make believe I am playing with my friends. I make it up. I make out like he is like Joe, my friend. He was about five. I make believe I have a friend Jerry. We have little pieces of paper and he stamps it and we pretend we get on the train and then a wagon and then a tricycle and then he goes and pulls it. I make believe that my sister Margaret is cooking and we are playing in the yard and then she calls us in and we all eat together. I make believe we all play house."

The imaginary companions are explained as an effort to clarify his past experiences and his insecure relationship to members of his scattered family. By phantasy he tried to reunite his family. In the short excerpt one can find references to his peregrinations and broken home. Free discussion of his problems and special tutoring in school work produced a notable improvement.

III. Marie was a 6½ year old white child of average intelligence. The mother neglected her, and was considered to be defective or psychotic. For the past 3 years the child had

been living with a paternal aunt. She would play with imaginary friends, talk to them and even fight with them. The child felt herself to be an outsider in her aunt's home. She received less attention and real affection than the aunt's children and reacted by misbehaving, lying and stealing. The friends she did not have she created for herself, and her play with them ran the gamut from affection through aggression.

IV. Lila was a 9½ year old white girl, referred from the Tuberculosis Boat School. Her father had been killed two years earlier in an accident. The mother was a serious mental case with marked paranoid ideas, with no understanding of the child's problems. Lila had a rich phantasy-life into which she had built her many problems. She was unstable and imitated her mother's emotional outbreaks. It was felt that Lila was a normal child and that her behavior problems were a direct reflection of the seriously inadequate home situation, and placement in a normal home was recommended. Through phantasy companions she had secured attention and affection that were lacking in real life.

V. John,<sup>1</sup> a white boy of 6½ years, of normal intelligence, was unmanageable and ran away from home. He presented such bizarre details of what seemed hallucinatory experiences that the question of a psychosis was entertained. He talked of having magic powers, hearing voices, and had attempted to set fire to the crib of his baby brother. Shortly after, the child admitted that the ideas he expressed were phantasy creations. His mother was a paralytic who actively rejected him. His father was thought to be a mental defective. The imaginary companions phantasied are of interest because they constitute a gang.

"I got a gang. I got friends—three, six. They run away so I got running away. The biggest one is 14 years. I'm the littlest. I am leader. They want me to be. They just sit there. They don't do anything else. The big boy got the idea first. His mother isn't good to him. That is why he runs away. His mother killed his father with a knife. I don't like my mother because the other boys don't like their mothers. I'm afraid my mother will kill my father. She doesn't like my father, nor me, or the baby—not anybody. I dream that I am going to get killed some day. Somebody is going to kill my father and me. My mother, I think. . . .",

From this confused story it appeared that John ran away from his unhappy home only to wander the streets, or sit in doorways, and phantasy his gang. He claims he was the leader—but always described most vividly the 14 year old "biggest boy" whose mother had killed his father. This was the fate he expected for himself. This phantasy represents a multiplication and enlargement of his own personality and its problems. This both increased his strength and offered him some companionship and reassurance, although it increased his feeling of being threatened and of being guilty. These phenomena subsided, and the threatening hallucinations and then the feeling of confusion disappeared. Subsequently John made a happy adjustment in the home of sympathetic relatives.

VI. June, a colored girl of 5 years, of average intelligence, was referred from the pediatric ward for pica. She was infantile and reverted to baby talk. Her mother rejected her, desiring a boy. June's infantile traits were of a nature intended to win attention and affection. The imaginary companion illustrates the child's preoccupation with her emotional problems. She says she has a brother Charlie who is 7 years old whom her mother likes very much, and who suckles at his mother's breast. Charlie eats wood and his mother spanks him and puts him in the corner. The imaginary companion is here used as a scapegoat. The child projects her unpleasant traits on her phantasy-creation. She becomes acceptable to her mother now that she no longer eats paint and dirt and paper, and the

<sup>1</sup> This boy was also discussed as Case 13 in Bender & Lipkowitz, *Hallucinations in Children*. AM. J. ORTHOPSYCHIATRY X: 3, 1940.

mother is punished vicariously for having preferred a boy-child. Charlie, the mother's favorite, though older than June and still permitted the privilege of nursing at the breast, eats wood and paper and deserves and receives punishment.

VII. Lena, a 7 year old colored girl of low average intelligence, was referred because of temper tantrums and attempted fire setting. The home situation was a confused one for the child ever since the age of two, when the father left and the mother began to live with another man. She was first cared for by neighbors, later by an aunt, and periods when she again stayed with her mother. She had a rich phantasy-life in regard to relationships of persons with whom she lived. Her phantasy companions were not clearly fixed but varied.

"Sometimes my sister is in the kitchen and nobody is in the living room and I play with somebody. I call a little girl Dorothy and a little boy James. Dorothy is 7 years old. She is a colored girl, like me. She is good. We play games. James is 6. He is bad. He goes out and runs and knocks children down. I don't play games with him."

Here the child projected her ego-ideal into the imaginary Dorothy who is good and has her virtues. James is clearly the scapegoat and the recipient of her defects. In criticizing James who is her "bad self," Lena need have no compunction, and attempts in this way to dissipate her guilt-feelings for her own misdeeds.

VIII. Arnold, a 6½ year old colored boy of Spanish-speaking parents, was a serious behavior problem, stealing and setting fires. He was rejected by his parents in favor of his younger brother and felt that his father took his mother's affection from him. He had a number of imaginary siblings and in particular, Louis. He would always say that his father's name was also Louis. He spoke of hitting him and sending him to jail. "I like to see my Big Brother Louis burn all over. Louis the name of big brother. My father name Louis. Louis looks like devil."

The imaginary companion is used not as a projection of part of the child's own personality, but rather as a personification of the hated qualities of another. Louis is obviously such a characterization of Arnold's father. The hatred and death wishes he must not have for his father are permitted against Louis, who is not a real brother but one created so that he can be satisfactorily hated and punished.

IX. Clara was a white girl, 9 years of age, of normal intelligence, whose mother was a mental defective and whose two older siblings had been in state hospitals. The child had suffered a traumatic sexual experience at the hands of an older feebled minded brother. Because she talked and played with herself she was teased and called "queer" by her family. On admission the child was in a state of acute anxiety. Within a short time she was able to give expression to her fantasies. "I make believe I have a baby. She is so nice. When I take her out she wants things. I give her a bath and keep her clean. I talk to myself a lot." She has a younger brother Irving, 5 years old. When he is away she pretends that they are playing and he does whatever she tells him. She makes believe that she is a boy 8 years old, and they have a grand time playing cowboy. She also made up a sister Mary, 6 years old. Mary is not nice and does not play well. She scolds Mary.

The phantasy play group consists of Irving as she would like to think he is, of herself as a boy a year younger, and a girl Mary. In real life Irving is not nice because he breaks up her things and quarrels with her. Clara's own unhappy characteristics are projected upon Mary, and she is able to release her unavowed feelings of guilt by freely criticizing Mary's faults. An interesting aspect of her phantasy is becoming a younger boy. In the family setup the younger sibling was

the object of attention and affection. By becoming a boy and younger than she actually is, she meets him on his own ground armed with his own weapons. So complete is her victory that Irving is no longer a rival, but a friendly, obedient playmate.

X. Dolores, a 7½ year old white girl of dull normal intelligence, was brought to the hospital because of frequent masturbation. She showed a tremendous feeling of guilt concerning this and felt rejected by her parents. Dolores was a child of the mother's first marriage which had been annulled. She was with her mother until the age of 3, then boarded out until she was 5. The mother remarried and the stepfather, though apparently fond of the child, expressed his preference for a boy many times in Dolores' hearing. This feeling of rejection is evidenced in the phantasy-creation.

"My mamma likes a baby boy. She wants to get rid of me. She often said she would like me to be a boy—because I'm worse than 10 kids. I'm rough and wild and dirty. I have two brothers. Their names are Tom and Harrison. My mother likes those names. They're not bad like me. They are very bright boys too, as bright as I am." (Mother says you have no brothers.) "I'll bet she put them away in a home. I'll ask her when she comes. Well, yes, they're make-believe."

Phantasy siblings here are an attempt at overcoming parental rejection. Dolores seems to have made two brothers of her ego-ideal. They were of the preferred sex—boys. They were not bad and they were very bright. They even had names that the mother liked. Vicariously or perhaps directly, Dolores could now share in the love her phantom siblings would receive from her parents.

XI. William was a 10 year old child of borderline intelligence, referred because he truanted, wrote obscene notes to girls and attempted to lift their dresses. His father definitely rejected him while his mother exhibited a confused ambivalent attitude. His companion was an anthropomorphized inanimate object—a pillow.

"I play with him. His name is Jackie. I put him on a horse—on a chair—and I ride with him. I make out I'm fighting with him and I hit him and I make believe he's bad. He hits the other boys and hits his mother. He hits his father because his father is small. I don't speak to him. I write it down on a paper. I write 'don't hit your mother and father'."

At times Jackie appears to be a companion for a lonely underprivileged child. In the main, he is a projection of William's 'bad qualities,' and his aggressive impulses against the parents are expressed without any concomitant feeling of guilt. Jackie hits his father who is small—a superb revenge for William, who thus makes his own father an inferior being and punishes him at the same time.

XII. George, a 10 year old white boy of high average intelligence, was referred because he presented a serious problem in behavior, lessons, and attendance. The mother was an over-solicitous woman, emotionally unstable and incapable of making a satisfactory marital adjustment.

On the Children's Ward careful examination revealed a left hemiatrophy with a deviation of the left eye upwards and outwards. An encephalogram showed no pathological changes in the brain. Physiotherapy and remedial exercises were instituted and his clumsiness was discussed in terms of his rapid growth rate. He showed great interest and became less restless and his tics and grimaces diminished. Soon he began to talk of his phantasy-life, not only to the physicians, but to the other children.

He said of his phantasy-creation: "My monkey's name is Fatto. Fatto can swim and jump over the Empire State Building. He has been disobeying me all the time. I think a

good spanking would do him good just out of charity on my part for the monkey. Fatto runs an elevator on the other side of Bellevue. He would run it so fast that I almost fell off my feet. Sometimes he does bad things. He used to like to climb on the fire escapes and tease people. Sometimes me and my mother gave him a spanking and sometimes we put him out in the cold when it was raining."

Fatto was graceful, agile and strong. He could do things that clumsy, awkward George could not. The child projected his ego-ideal into Fatto and lived out his hitherto unexpressed wishes for strength and skill. Fatto when bad, typifies instinctual desires. In the series of puppet-show plays that Bender and Woltmann (15) have evolved and that are performed regularly on the Children's Ward, the monkey is used as a personification of the id-impulses.

When George improved he went home and it was arranged for him to return as a day pupil. One morning he spoke in an agitated manner about a tiger: "Do you know about my tiger? My little tiger went out and met a male tiger. The male tiger kicked my little tiger in the pants and he kicked so hard that the baby that was in the toe of that big ugly tiger slipped into my little tiger and now my tiger is going to have a baby. And that big male tiger must eat one arm a week and how do I know what he's up to while I'm in school? He might eat my tiger's arm. Anyway, he's like a big lumbering elephant around the house; he's too big for my mother and he's younger than she is."

We are led to infer that the boy was concerned about his mother because of some new episode in her personal life, and the phantasied animals represent his mother and her problems. The child was struggling with a very unpleasant reality and he expressed his conflicts and worries readily in this fashion.

XIII. It is known that masturbation is usually accompanied by some sort of phantasied love object. This problem might justify further study: to determine to what extent the phantasied companions in sex play or the love object in masturbation are similar to other phantasy-companions; or to what extent they play a similar role in the psychology of the child. The following case throws some light on this.

Joyce was a 7 year old white girl of superior intelligence, brought because of persistent masturbation. The father was in prison, the mother worked, and the child had been subjected to a great deal of deprivation. She had precocious sexual interests at a number of levels. First she admitted to excessive masturbation with active sex sensations and relief (orgasm?). Second, there were vivid phantasies of heterosexual experiences which she claimed were with an imaginary boy of her own age, occurring with masturbation and sometimes in dreams. In her own mind, she questioned their reality, admitting there was no such boy. Third, she had preoccupations with social problems which are usually considered adolescent. She had an ideal of a future husband and was preoccupied sentimentally with the possibility of having a baby, and of her mother getting married. It is of interest that most of her phantasy-life and preoccupations in regard to sex was in terms of cousins, aunts and uncles. This is presumably due to the fact that as long as she can remember, she had no father in her home. Her phantasy-life revealed itself in free association, art work, dreams and in active play. One of her dreams follows:

"I had a beautiful dream. I was captured by pirates and a boy scout came and rescued me. The boy scout looks like my cousin Joe. He is 7 years old. Do we have fun! Sure he likes me. We hardly do anything but kiss. I see him once a week, Saturday. We sleep together in the same bed and we kiss and hug and cuddle up to each other. All night long we sleep with our lips together." (The mother stated there was no such person.)

XIV. Jack, a ten year old negro boy was referred because he ran away from home, and was aggressive in play. His mother was dead; he had been raised by an aunt but when the father remarried he went to live with his father and stepmother. Most of his behavior

problems became serious after that. His older brother had had his eyes injured in infancy. The blindness became complete when Jack, still a baby, injured them further with a stick. Supposedly Jack was too young to remember this and knows nothing about it.

Although Jack never admitted blaming himself for his brother's condition, his phantasy-life revealed a great deal of preoccupation with this. He said his brother got blind because the mother liked him better and would rock the brother in her arms and leave Jack on the floor. She was rocking him in this way when he fell against the stove; otherwise the accident would have happened to Jack. In his phantasy play he and his brother, no longer blind, would play games that required normal vision. In his dreams the blind brother got killed because he was struck by cars he could not see. His dreams expressed his anxiety and guilt while his conscious phantasies expressed his effort to correct an unpleasant reality.

### DISCUSSION

The phantasied companions and siblings in childhood have, in our experience, a positive or constructive value in the personality development of the child. They represent an effort to compensate for some lack or deficiency in the child's experiences or in his relationship with the world. This is a lack for which the child is not to blame but for which he must suffer and, if possible, try to compensate. The forms and functions of the phantasied companions are as manifold as the problems of childhood and are appropriate to each individual case. In general, two particular factors contribute most to the creation of these phantasies. (1) An unsatisfactory parent-child relationship (a weak super-ego in the terminology of some). (2) Unsatisfactory experiences from the world of reality due to unfavorable social or economic situations. Far from representing a willful and malicious "flight from reality" this phantasy represents the child's normal effort to compensate for a weak and inadequate reality to round out his incomplete life experiences and to help create a more integrated personality to deal with the conflicts of his individual life.

The child who has created an imaginary companion enters into active physical play with its creation. He is not content to play in phantasy, passively, but carries out the same activities and plays the same games as with a real playmate. Material derived from his own environment, from books, radio serials, or motion pictures, is used to accomplish this purpose. Reality is used as plastic material molded to fit the gaping spaces of the child's own unsatisfactory emotional and physical environment.

### SUMMARY

1. A survey of the scientific publications relating to imaginary companions and the use of the theme in popular literature has been made.
2. A group of 14 cases has been studied in which imaginary companions played important roles in the psychological life of the child.
3. Imaginary companions were in non-psychotic children. There was no instance in which we had reason to believe that they represented a feature in a pre-psychotic state.
4. Imaginary companion is a psychological mechanism used by the child to supplement deficient environmental experiences and emotional inadequacies,

especially unsatisfactory parent-child relationships, and depriving or distorting experiences with reality.

5. The creation of the companions in phantasy is a positive and healthful mechanism used during a time of need but immediately given up when the need no longer exists.

6. The form and content of the phantasies are specific in each instance for the problems of the individual child. When the child relates the phantasy, we are given a clear insight into his problems and needs, even if all the details of the situations which called forth the mechanism are not known.

7. The imaginary companion is the representation of varied psychological mechanisms including personification of the id-impulse, ego-ideal, super-ego, aggressive and guilt trends, feelings of rejection and inferiority, etc.

8. Therapy based upon rearrangement of the environmental situations and insight into the basic psychological trends is sufficient to cause the phantasied companions to disappear.

9. The child may then speak of his phantasied companions in the past tense, be loath to speak of them at all, or claim he has forgotten them. They seem partially or wholly to pass really into the unconscious. The same or similar companions may reappear if the environmental stress again becomes overwhelming.

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